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ABSTRACT

This study examined the student teaching experience through the eyes of 459 student teachers who had recently completed their internships at the elementary school level. The participants were asked to write a letter of advice to incoming student teachers, describing the highs and lows of student teaching and giving any advice that they thought would be helpful to new student teachers. The letters were all written the day after the students had completed their student teaching assignments, so the experiences were fresh in their memories. The letters were analyzed to identify categories of advice. Twenty-seven categories were identified and placed into five major groups: (1) professional relationships, (2) professional attitudes, (3) professional advice, (4) personal advice, and (5) concerns. Each letter was then analyzed for specific comments. Results underscored the critical role of the cooperating teacher, the need for effective communication with the cooperating teacher, and the need for broader staff involvement with student teachers in the school. The paper presents respondents' comments in each of the five categories. (SM)

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Running head: STUDENTS' VOICES

The Voices of Student Teachers

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Abstract

Four hundred and fifty-nine students who had recently completed their internships at the elementary school level were asked to write a letter of advice to incoming student teachers. The letters were analyzed to identify categories of advice. Twenty-three categories were identified that were placed into four major groups: (1) relationships, (2) attitudes, (3) professional advice, and (4) personal advice. Four categories of concerns also emerged from the study. The categories are examined to identify the perceptions of student teachers as to the factors that contribute to success or detract from success in student teaching at the elementary school level.

The Voices of Student Teachers

Student teaching is the capstone experience of elementary teacher preparation programs. The Study of the Education of Educators (Su, 1992) revealed that student teaching was considered by students to be the "most important source of influence" on socialization into teaching (Su, 1992, p. 254). Four or more years of course work, hours of classroom observations, and countless subject matter and methodology preparations come together in this major passage from student to classroom teacher. The student teachers are usually excited, intimidated, anxious, enthused, and committed. What are their thoughts and feelings about the experience as they exit student teaching? What helped them to succeed? What were the inhibitors that they experienced? What can they tell us about how to improve the program so that student teachers that follow will experience success?

The importance of classroom management and organization for success in student teaching were emphasized by Springer and Wright (1994). Klann (1996) reflects that her student teaching experiences suggest "successful teaching is inherently predicated upon establishing and maintaining sound classroom management" (p. 92). Gottiffi (1994) listed five pieces of advice that she wished that her master teacher had communicated to her as she began student teaching: (1) clear expectations, (2) classroom management ideas, (3) establish the student teacher as a safe and impartial authority figure, (4)

mistakes are acceptable if you learn from them, and (5) help is available, seek it out.

Cooperating teachers were encouraged by Gallant (1994) to establish rapport with student teachers, acclimate them to the teaching situation and take time to explain why they do things as well as what they do (Gallant, 1994). Nine pieces of advice to cooperating teachers for working with student teachers were provided by student teacher Ludwig (1994): (1) get a headstart, (2) be considerate, (3) walk softly, (4) communicate openly, (5) look before you leap, (6) provide constructive criticism, (7) learn to let go, (8) allow time for visitation, (9) ease back into routine. Rickard and Knight (1997) found that "interns tended to adopt their clinical teachers' practices in order to get along and to fit in" (p. 450). Su (1992) also found that cooperating teachers were one of the most powerful sources of influence on student teachers. According to the data that she analyzed student teachers had very little contact with teachers in the school other than the cooperating teacher.

The voices of the thousands of student teachers have been relatively silent on the strengths and weaknesses of student teaching. They have not been heard from on what would be more helpful to them as they prepare for the teaching profession. There are a limited number of studies that have gathered data with the purpose of improving this capstone experience. The purpose of this study was to look at the student teaching experience for several

hundred elementary student teachers through their eyes and give them voice in shaping better internships.

Methodology

Four hundred and fifty-nine elementary student teachers were asked to give their advice concerning student teaching over a three-year period. Each of the subjects was asked to write a one-page letter to a new student teacher describing the high lights and low lights of student teaching and to give any advice that was thought to be helpful to a new student teacher. The letters were all written the day after the students had completed their student teaching assignments so the experiences were fresh in their memories. Fifteen minutes of time was allotted for the letter writing.

The letters were read for the identification of categories. A total of 27 subcategories were identified (see Table 1). Five major categories were identified: (a) professional relationships, (b) professional attitudes, © professional advice, (d) personal advice, and (e) concerns. The letters were then analyzed for content within these five major categories. Each major category was divided into four to seven subcategories. Each letter was then analyzed for specific comments. Some of the letters had comments that applied to several categories while some letters had comments that only applied to one category. If a letter contained several comments that fit into only one category that letter was only counted once. However, if a letter contained comments that addressed several categories each category that was scored once.

Voices of the Student Teachers

In the area of professional relationships it was not surprising to find that most of the comments focused on developing and maintaining good relationships with the cooperating teachers and all staff members. Nicole's letter is an example of the emphasis placed on the value of working closely with the cooperating teacher: "If you are fortunate enough to have a strong and positive mentor, take all of her constructive feedback seriously and apply it. I found taking the advice of my cooperating teacher a very smart move. I would also advise you to blend your outstanding and innovative ideas on lessons and management with those already established by the teacher." Hope expressed a more cynical view of developing a good relationship: "You sort of have to play the game. You are entering another teacher's territory and you'll have to follow the rules. Be humble and lovable, you are a guest and your cooperating teacher has to pull the class back together after you leave."

Donna advised using the professional advice available: "Relax! Have fun! Go with the flow! Remember to listen to all of the experienced professionals around you."

It was surprising the low emphasis that was placed on developing a good relationship with university supervisors and the very few comments that suggest using other student teachers for support. The university supervisors are ultimately responsible for the student teaching grade and the written recommendations for the placement folders. One of the reasons that students

are clustered into groups of three or more in elementary schools is to provide opportunities for peer support. Yet, neither the role of the university supervisor or the potential support of peers was perceived as an important factor contributing to success in student teaching.

Professional attitudes expressed in the letters were extremely positive. The comments in this area encouraged student teachers to be human and genuine allowing the students to see them as enthusiastic and fun loving. Rewards were seen as coming from interaction with the children.

Professional advice focused on being pro-active in the classroom and the school. Preparing early and staying organized and focused were commented on most frequently in this category. Cherie gave the following warning: "Wow! What an experience! I really enjoyed and truly loved my student internship. But I warn you be prepared. It's a very long haul. It takes a lot of time to prepare and implement lessons. Do not work or plan any vacations. Take my advice and devote as much time as possible and really put your heart into it." Student teachers thought that it was important to work hard and become very involved in school activities.

Many of the letter writers encouraged the new student teachers to take the initiative and try fresh ideas. The comments on beginning the resume and portfolio early may reflect some frustration by those who had just finished their student teaching and had not yet completed these tasks. Although pre-student teachers appear to have an insatiable appetite for classroom management

these four hundred and fifty nine respondents did not dwell on classroom management concerns.

Personal advice can become professional advice under varying circumstances. The press of time in the student teaching experience was expressed clearly in this category. Stay healthy, sleep, and don't work another job all speak to the pressures of time felt by the interns who had just completed their student teaching. The statement: "Don't work another job!" appeared several times and is indicative of the time commitment necessary for successful student teaching. Kristen summarized her time commitment in these words: "I rarely went out during the week, my whole mind was always consumed with my lessons and planning. Be prepared to put a lot of time and effort into this experience." Kerry provided a more specific time commitment: "I spent a good 3 to 4 hours each night checking papers and preparing for future lessons."

Don't gossip is sound advice in any setting, but it is surprising that was initiated in so many letters. I would not have thought that student teachers would have the opportunities to develop the relationships or have the opportunities for gossip. Reflect on your teaching and keep a journal possibly may have been suggested more frequently if the student teachers had had more time available for reflection and writing.

Concerns reflected the problems with classroom management that are frequently associated with student teaching. The physical demands and time

demands come out very clearly in the concern category. The no pay comments were few, but coupled with the difficulty of holding down another job this subcategory may be of greater magnitude than the numbers suggest. This area is worthy of further investigation. It is difficult to estimate how many well-qualified students do not complete or even begin teacher preparation programs because of a required extended period when no income is generated.

Reluctance of the cooperating teacher to let go also generated few comments, but for seven or more student teachers it was probably an inhibition in professional growth. This comment although few in number must be taken seriously and the concern merits further inquiry.

Emily summarized her feelings and that of many other student teachers: "The hours will be long and the work can be hard, but don't let that discourage you. As I am sitting here on my last day as an undergrad, I know that it was all worth it. I am leaving with the confidence that I will be able to teach."

Insert Table 1 here

Conclusions

Most of the findings presented in this paper are consistent with those presented in the literature. There is an emphasis on working and communicating effectively with the cooperating teacher and other staff members. A number of comments encourage student teachers to take the initiative. There was less emphasis from this population on classroom management than the literature or conventional wisdom would lead teacher educators to believe that there would be. The study underscored the critical role of the cooperating teacher and the need for broader staff involvement with student teachers in the school. This necessitates greater effort by the teacher preparation programs in working more closely with them in the student teaching experience.

The data from this study was shared in table form with small groups of student teachers for discussion and verification. Many of the student teachers elaborated on specific categories. All of the student teachers agreed with findings presented here. Most of the student teachers expressed a wish that someone had shared this or similar data with them before they had started their student teaching experience. Therefore these findings have been presented to methods classes during the past year.

Limitations

This study was limited to elementary student teachers at one university. Certainly the characteristics of the program will have an influence on the results. The one page letter is a simple, unstructured way to obtain feedback

on a student teaching program. This appraisal process will be continued at the elementary level and initiated at the secondary level. Although the comments tend to cluster there is sufficient latitude for individuals to express unique insights.

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Table 1

Intern Teacher Advice and Concerns
Number of Respondents = **459**

		Responses
Professional Relationships		
1.	Build and maintain a good relationship with the cooperating teacher	**117**
2.	Develop good relationships with all staff	**91**
3.	Get to know the principal	**27**
4.	Develop a good relationship with the university supervisors	**23**
5.	Use other intern teachers for support	**09**
Professional Attitudes		
6.	Maintain a sense of humor, smile, have fun	**98**
7.	Relax! Don't frustrate or stress yourself	**63**
8.	Be open minded and flexible	**40**
9.	Enjoy the children	**39**
10.	Be positive and enthusiastic	**36**
11.	Be yourself	**28**
12.	Learn to accept and use criticism	**15**
Professional Advice -		
13.	Prepare in advance. Stay organized and focused	**80**
14.	Get involved with school activities	**55**
15.	Take the initiative. Try new ideas. Don't be afraid to make mistakes	**39**
16.	Begin resume and portfolio early	**26**
17.	Learn the expectancies	**09**
18.	Focus on classroom management early	**08**
19.	Begin slowly	**05**
Personal Advice		
20.	Stay healthy and get lots of sleep	**39**
21.	Don't gossip - Don't say anything negative	**30**
22.	Don't work another job	**21**
23.	Reflect on your teaching and keep a journal	**10**
Concerns		
24.	Problems with classroom management	**29**
25.	Hard work, exhausting and time consuming	**28**
26.	Cooperating teacher reluctant to let go	**08**
27.	No pay	**04**